

GRADUATE STUDY FOR THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

HOW TO BUILD AN ACADEMIC
CAREER IN THE HUMANITIES

Gregory M. Colón Semenza

With a Foreword by

Michael Bérubé

palgrave
macmillan

This 350-word summary of your dissertation—which is extremely painful to write—will be sent to Proquest Information and Learning, where it will be registered with and published by Dissertation Abstracts International. Pick up an instruction booklet from your graduate school early on in your dissertation-writing career. By following the university's guidelines from the beginning, you'll cut down on the work you'll be forced to do later on.

Once you submit the dissertation to the graduate school, the only steps left to take are to order your doctoral cap and gown (\$500 to \$1,000, by the way) and to register for graduation. The day that you thought would never arrive is here at last. You'll want to begin thinking about those revisions and your first book very soon (see pp. 215–23 on writing the book prospectus), but for now be sure to take a break and think about all that you've accomplished.

CHAPTER 9

ATTENDING CONFERENCES

The thought of volunteering to deliver an in-depth presentation before a couple dozen experts in your field may horrify you, but attending conferences is one of the routine activities of humanities scholars. The actual usefulness of conferences is a more controversial issue. Personally, I am of the viewpoint that well-used conferences can positively transform one's research and even one's career. Nonetheless, in this chapter I will try to show you both sides of the picture. Among the other subjects I will discuss are the following:

- Using oral reports as practice for conferences
- Finding the right conference
- Contacting a conference organizer
- Writing a lively presentation
- Networking
- Conferencing as job market preparation

By and large, you will find that conferences are relatively collegial—even pleasant—affairs and that the anxieties they provoke in most inexperienced scholars are unwarranted. By the time you finish reading this chapter, you should be able to envision what will happen when you attend your first few conferences, which should in turn give you the right amount of confidence to be successful.

WHAT IS A CONFERENCE?

Academic conferences have many different faces, but the one unifying link between them is a very basic goal: to bring together scholars for the purpose of sharing *ongoing* research. From the perspective of the presenter, conferences represent an opportunity to publicize one's work and to receive feedback that may be helpful in the process of revising it. From the perspective of the auditors, conferences represent

a type of continuing education, revealing what's hot at the moment in a particular scholarly field and, in the best situations, suggesting likely trends for the foreseeable future.

Conferences are arranged, sponsored, and run by a variety of organizations and individuals. The smallest conferences, usually hosted by individual faculty members in specific college or university departments, may attract only 20 or 30 attendees and may last no more than a day. Such conferences tend to be highly focused on particular topics (e.g., "Minds and Bodies in Medieval Europe"), and they have the potential to foster useful professional relationships by virtue of their ability to draw like-minded people into relatively intimate environments. Universities also host larger, multi-day conferences, which, if conveniently located or focused on a provocative enough topic, can attract hundreds of attendees. These larger conferences feature more sessions and, therefore, can accommodate a greater number of participants than those of the single-day variety, which usually center on four or five prominent speakers. The biggest conferences tend to be sponsored by national or regional scholarly associations such as the MLA or the American Historical Association (AHA). Since they attract thousands of attendees and feature hundreds of speakers, they usually take place at large hotels and convention centers in major cities. Though such conferences can be overwhelming and are extremely impersonal, they have the advantage of being able to offer something of interest to just about everyone.

Except for the smallest gatherings, most conferences are built around multiple "sessions" focused on a unifying theme, each comprising a "panel" of speakers. While a plenary session may involve only one distinguished speaker, typical conference panels consist of an organizing chair or moderator and three speakers. In some fields, a "respondent" is permitted time to address the three papers and the connections between them. In the majority of cases, each session lasts about an hour and thirty minutes, which allows for a short introduction by the chair, three 20-minute presentations, and an approximately 30-minute long question-and-answer period. If panels run successively, they tend to attract larger audiences. If they run simultaneously, the size of the audience will vary drastically based on the prestige of the speakers and the attractiveness of the topic. Depending on the type of conference, the time of the session, and even factors as unpredictable as the weather, sessions will vary in shape and size.

As a speaker, you should think logically about how your session is likely to be run (it's okay to ask the chair ahead of time), but you also should be prepared for anything. In different situations, I have spoken to as few as five and as many as seventy-five audience members. I have

been required to use a microphone and stand at a podium on a stage, and I have been asked to sit in a circle composed of armchair desks of the sort we all have in our classrooms. I have been asked to limit some presentations to ten minutes, and I have been permitted to speak at others for as many as forty-five minutes. I have given papers that attracted half a dozen questions and others that provoked only the most deafening silence. Your experiences will be no less diverse. As a rule, though, I would encourage you to plan your conference sessions according to what I call the 20/20 principle: that is, think of the average conference paper as a 20-minute presentation that you will deliver to about 20 audience members. You will find that this principle generally applies in the vast majority of conference scenarios.

Finally, most conferences offer a number of activities, cultural and otherwise, relevant to the particular meeting. Nearly all conferences include an overpriced luncheon or dinner, which, depending on the size and nature of the conference, may or may not be worth your time and money. Far more exciting and valuable are the cultural activities arranged by many conference organizers. A three-day drama conference might commence with an opening-night performance of *Pygmalion*. At a Jackson Pollock conference in New York City, you might be offered discount tickets to visit MOMA. Or as an attendee of a one-day conference on Spanish colonialism, you might be permitted free of charge to visit a local museum of Native-American history. Regarding such activities, pursue whatever you think might be useful or enjoyable.

WHY, WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW MANY?

When considering how many conferences to attend prior to graduation, you should remember that \$1.25 and ten conference credits on your CV will get you a steaming cup of coffee. Conference presentations are not substitutes for publications, and they are worth very little in and of themselves. In other words, no Ph.D. has ever been hired because he happened to present papers at ten conferences. As a demonstration of scholarly activity supplementing a solid publication record, however, a strong list of conference presentations will no doubt strengthen your CV. So where does this information leave us? Why should I attend conferences? Which ones? How many?

Why You Should Attend

I'll never forget my excitement, as a second-year MA student, upon receiving my first conference paper acceptance letter. I sat down at my

desk and enthusiastically whipped up a ten-page paper to end all conference papers. For weeks I revised and recited. Several months later I hopped a flight to Edmonton where I presented the paper to a small group of audience members. Now, 10 years later, the conference paper is still in my possession. Unfortunately, it's still ten pages long, and its content has never been published in any form. The idea underlying the paper is not half bad, actually. In fact, if I had the time or the inclination, I could probably turn it into a publication, but this would require tearing up the ten pages and starting from scratch.

At the time I wrote the paper, I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. I knew that I wanted to present a paper at a conference because this was what I saw my professors and advanced graduate-student colleagues doing. I had no understanding, though, why they were doing it. If I had asked, someone surely would have told me that I should think of conference presentations as drafts of papers with far more glorious futures ahead of them. Such a response might have prevented me from writing my paper as if it were the thing itself.

There are five good reasons to attend conferences, all of which have to do with the *future state* of what you will present there:

1. First and foremost, you should attend because doing so may lead to the publication of ongoing research. A presentation to your colleagues will give you a sense of how well your ideas are likely to be received by a journal's readers. Their feedback should help you to identify the strengths and weaknesses of your paper, determine the adequacy of your bibliography (auditors love to suggest other works "you *really* should read"), and gain a sense of what needs to be elaborated, added, or cut from the paper. Think of the best conference experiences as opportunities for vetting your ideas.
2. Next, you should attend conferences because they are excellent venues for *advertising* your ongoing research. Especially at the dissertation, job hunting, and book marketing stages, it will be quite important for you to associate your name with a specific project or topic. Ideally you will create a situation wherein people thinking of a particular research topic—for example, eroticism in witchcraft rituals—will think specifically of your name. Conference activity should be stepped up, therefore, at periods when longer research projects are close to completion.
3. Attend conferences because of the networking opportunities they present. Scenarios in which networking is appropriate are far too numerous to record here, but consider the following example.

Let's say you've chosen to write your dissertation on the erotics of sixteenth-century English witchcraft rituals. While no one has studied this particular aspect of the rituals (they have, of course), Sir Genius Johnson is widely known as *the* expert on English witchcraft rituals. Having him on your dissertation committee would be quite a boon—a real endorsement of your work. You decide to submit an abstract for a panel he happens to be chairing. Or, you simply decide to attend a talk he will be giving at a local conference. When he sees your abstract or hears about your idea, he seems genuinely interested and asks you to keep in touch as the project continues to develop. Now you have established an acquaintanceship that might lead to bigger things.

4. When appropriate, attend conferences in order to pitch your research to editors. Most large conferences attract editors of major university and trade presses, who recognize conferences as ideal places to advertise their books and journals, to assess what's hot in the scholarly world, and to meet prospective authors. Especially when you are ready to begin revising your dissertation for publication as a book, conversations with editors may prove vital to your success.
5. Finally, attend conferences in order to immerse yourself in the professional culture of academe. While this advice may seem overly vague in comparison with points 1–4, it should be taken no less seriously. Conferences will teach you a good deal about the inner workings of your discipline, especially those pertaining to the publishing world. Any experiences you accumulate are likely to be useful down the road, which takes us back to the beginning: if nothing else, my first conference experience was useful insofar as it taught me *what not to do* the next time around.

When You Should Attend

Think about attending your first conference near the end of your second year or during any point in the third year. By this time, you will have enough experience writing seminar papers to understand the basics of academic research and writing, and you also will have a number of longer research projects from which to draw ideas and subject matter. There is no point in conferencing too early, since underdeveloped confidence and experience may lead to problems that should be avoided; conversely, there isn't much point in waiting too long to attend a conference since your confidence and understanding of the discipline will grow with each conference experience.

Which Conferences You Should Attend

Unless you are doing it solely to build confidence and have no plan whatsoever to record it on your CV, do not waste your time attending a graduate student conference. Know that you are more than capable of succeeding at a "real" conference and seek out the superior benefits of attending one. Know also that a job application boasting of a presentation at a graduate student conference will strike many search committee members as rather pathetic. Before you submit a paper, you might benefit from attending a conference either at your own or a nearby university. Seeing what goes on there will make you more confident about your ability to participate. Once you decide you are ready, submit an abstract or a paper for a regional (or a relatively small) conference. Once you have a presentation or two under your belt, be more ambitious and shoot for acceptances at national or international conferences. Talk to your advisors about those five conferences that are most important in your field, and make it a point to give a paper at one or more of them prior to graduation.

How Many Papers You Should Give

As in publishing, quality is always more important than quantity. Simply remember that two conference presentations that develop eventually into publications are worth far more than five or more presentations that don't. Stay focused on what you wish to gain from conference papers over the long haul. Avoid getting bogged down in numbers.

HOW TO APPLY FOR A CONFERENCE

The Selection Process

Sometimes a conference announcement will inspire you to submit—or generate from scratch—a paper or an abstract. At other times you will shop for a conference in order to submit a preexisting paper. In either case, the application process will be roughly the same. The first step you must take is to become aware of your options. Scholars now benefit from many useful websites that announce submission deadlines for upcoming conferences according to subject, topic, and discipline. More tried and true methods for discovering upcoming conferences and submission deadlines include checking the "Calls for Papers" regularly printed in field-specific journals, becoming a member in professional associations that sponsor annual conferences, and discussing what's available with advisors who are active conference-goers.

CFP: Milton in Modern Popular Culture (MLA '03; 3/15/03; 12/27-30/03)

Milton and Modern Popular Culture: An MLA panel sponsored by the Milton Society of America exploring modern pop-cultural appropriations and engagements with Milton's poetry and prose. Co-chairs Laura Lunger Knoppers and Gregory Colón Semenza are interested in essays that consider the presence of Milton in film, television, advertising, rock music, popular technologies, and other popular media. Essays on the uses of such media in the Milton classroom are welcome. Please send abstracts of 500 words or complete, 20-minute papers to either of the following two addresses by March 15, 2003.

Figure 9.1 Sample call for papers

Let's consider a hypothetical scenario by which you might select an appropriate conference. In one of your first seminars, your professor mentioned a University of Pennsylvania website (<http://www.english.upenn.edu/CFP/>), which posts Calls for Papers related to all subjects of English studies. You immediately bookmarked the site and have made it a point to check about once a month the "recent messages" for British studies. One day a particular announcement catches your eye. Figure 9.1 reproduces a call for papers as it would appear on the website.

Notice that the CFP announces both the dates by which submissions must be received and the dates during which the actual conference will be held. The announcement clearly indicates the type of paper the panel chair will be happy to receive. Since you wrote a very solid paper on *Blade Runner* just last semester, this conference offers you a good opportunity to begin reworking it for publication. Plus, it's nearby. You decide to work up the requested one-page abstract.

Generating an Abstract

An "abstract" is simply a summary of a text. For conference applications, you will write two kinds of abstract. The first—usually for a paper that you have not yet written—takes the form of a more overt proposal: "In this paper, I will explore X". The second—usually for a paper you've already written in one form or another—tends to be more argumentative and may even present conclusions. As the two abstracts would suggest, conference proposals share several common rhetorical features, though they may order those parts differently. First, as both examples in the appendix would suggest, an abstract usually offers some sort of historical or scholarly context out of which the eventual argument will grow. If the essay is nonhistorical, you may begin by covering a scholarly debate. If it is historical, you'll want to put the

historical facts on the table fairly early on. Second, give a sense of how you read the text, other cultural artifact, or the historical context differently from previous investigators—what we called in chapter 5 the “situating move” (see pp. 97–99). Tell us what you are contributing to existing scholarly discourses. Finally, deliver your argument or, if you haven’t yet written the paper, your hypothesis, along with a sense of its implications for current and future scholarship.

Always be careful to follow a chair’s directions to a tee. If he requests a one-page single-spaced abstract, do not send a longer document. Like typos, ugly print-outs, and other signs of unprofessionalism, not following directions gives conference chairs convenient reasons to select other people’s papers.

Writing the Cover Letter

As always, cover letters should be simple. Explain that you are responding to the Call for Papers. Give the title of your paper with no more than a one-sentence description of its content. Make sure you provide contact information so that the chair can easily get back to you, and thank the addressee for his time. Pages 283–84 offer an example of a typical cover letter for submitting a conference abstract. Once you put the abstract in the mail, be patient. It may be months before you hear anything. In most cases, panel chairs alone decide which papers to accept. A CFP for a local conference may attract only five or six proposals. A CFP for an international or national conference might attract 50 or more. The duration of your wait, therefore, will depend largely on the size of the conference at which you hope to present your paper.

PREPARING THE PRESENTATION

Once your paper has been accepted, it’s time to begin shaping the actual presentation. The amount of work you’ll need to do will depend largely on whether you’re condensing and reworking a seminar paper (highly recommended) or creating a presentation from scratch. In either case, while writing the paper try to keep your mind focused on the odd and contradictory form of a typical humanities presentation: on the one hand, we usually read our presentations, as opposed to memorizing them or guiding them with software such as PowerPoint; on the other hand, our audience has none of the benefits of typical readers, such as the ability to alter pace, skip tedious material, or review difficult passages. Good presenters think carefully about the difficult position of their audience members, and they adjust their presentations accordingly.

None of this will be shockingly new to you. Effective conference presentations draw on three skills developed early on in graduate school: oral reporting, teaching, and seminar paper writing. In what follows, I offer advice about how to prepare conference presentations by drawing specifically on these familiar skills. If your experience in one or more of these areas has been limited, you’ll simply need to spend a bit more time thinking about how to address certain issues covered below.

The Oral Report as Practice

Presumably, if you’re planning to attend a conference, you’ve already read several papers in front of a crowd. Oral reports are standard assignments in humanities seminars, especially the ubiquitous “Review of Literature/Criticism” or “Annotated Bibliography” reports that we all come to know and hate. But even such seemingly tedious assignments as these pay infinite dividends later on when we arrive at our first conferences. Both the oral reports that we deliver in seminars and those we hear others deliver teach us a great deal about the attributes of a successful presentation. In relation to conference papers specifically, we can break down these attributes into three equally important categories:

Presence: Memorable speakers are never sheepish. Nor are they difficult to hear or understand. Not every person can simply light up a room by entering it, but most of us can practice presentational behavior that keeps attention adequately focused on us. Your eyes are the chief magnet, of course, and so it’s extremely important to look up from your paper now and then to meet the various sections of the room. Consider your own experience and take note of your behavior the next time you attend a talk of any sort: if the speaker refuses at any point to look up from his paper or if he looks only at one side of the room, you will be infinitely more likely to allow your eyes to wander; you may even roll your eyes, yawn, or sigh loudly. If the speaker looks at you occasionally, though, you will be very unlikely to do any of these things. The point is not merely that such behavior is rude and, therefore, to be avoided. The point, rather, is that occasional eye contact will keep auditors focused on you and what you’re saying. If you have a weak voice or tend to mumble, practice delivering your presentations aloud to partners and friends. Train yourself to hear the new, loud voice you will bring to the conference. Nothing puts an audience to sleep more quickly than a soft voice.

Pacing and Time Management: An important fact worth stressing is that, so far as I know, no one has ever complained about a scholarly

presentation being too short. One major advantage of a shorter paper is that it allows you to establish a perfect speaking pace. Ask experienced conference-goers about the average length of their typical 20-minute presentations, and they will give you answers ranging from 8 to 12 pages. The range is accounted for by the fact that whereas the 12-pagers fly through their presentations, the 8-pagers may actually read too slowly. As a rule, the more nervous you are, the more quickly your presentation will go. As a graduate instructor, I've noticed that first-year MA students tend to speak at a much faster pace than more experienced students. Make it your goal to establish a pace that allows you to speak clearly, to pause after important points, to intersperse impromptu comments where appropriate, and to emphasize specific words or passages. Practice reading your presentation aloud with the clock running. Whatever you do, make sure that you do not exceed the time limit mandated by your panel chair or conference organizer. At best, an excessively long paper will succeed in annoying everyone in the room. At worst, the chair will cut off your presentation before you are able to conclude, a humiliating situation that I have witnessed on two occasions. A good rule to follow: in practicing for a 20-minute presentation, try to time out consistently at 19 minutes.

Diplomacy and Collegiality: If "Literature Review"-type reports teach us anything, it's how to discuss other scholars' work in more or less appropriate ways. Since as always, you will need to situate your work in relation to previous scholarship (see pp. 97-99), the skills you've already learned in your seminars will prove invaluable at conferences. Just avoid falling into the trap of assuming that a harsh critique of an author demonstrates intellectual rigor. Focus less on what you perceive to be flaws and more on what you perceive to be strengths, and highlight what your audience needs to know to be able to measure your contribution. An overly belligerent or negative tone will send a clear message to your audience about how you wish to define the terms of the conversation; if you suggest that scholarly conversations are to be combative rather than collegial and respectful, you should expect to be attacked in turn during the question and answer period. Work instead to establish the sort of constructive tone and terminology that you would like others to employ when confronting your research.

Teaching as Practice

One *could* think of a conference presentation solely from the perspective of the presenter. I would caution you to avoid doing so. Understanding how teaching is analogous to the presentation of a conference paper

nicely emphasizes the fact that such presentations need to be considered from the perspective of the audience. The point of delivering a presentation is not merely to display one's learning, in other words, but to alter or enhance the ways in which the subject matter is perceived and understood by an audience. With this point in mind, you have much to gain from drawing on skills you've likely been practicing in the classroom.

Enthusiasm

As you know from your role as both a student and teacher, there is no adequate substitute for passion in learning situations. Because so many academic talks are dry and, well, *academic*, lively and enthusiastic speakers tend to separate themselves from the crowd. Find in your paper what you're most excited about and work to convey this excitement to your audience. Create a sense of exigency about what you're doing in order to keep your audience alert and focused on what you have to say.

Organization

Though we all can probably cite exceptions to the rule, good teachers tend to be organized, primarily in the sense that they help us to know where we've been, where we are, and where we happen to be going. One major difference between a conference paper and an article is that the former should be much more explicitly architectural and aware of its structure. Since your audience will miss out on the benefits of being able to control their "reading" of your paper, you should go out of your way to help them to follow your argument and your methodology. Whereas metawriting ("In this paper, I will do X") *can be* awkward or even annoying in a seminar paper or article (usually, it's very effective), it is almost always appreciated in a conference setting. Especially in your introduction, make it a point to announce your objectives, as shown in figure 9.2.

What I will focus on in this talk is the complex manner in which the category, youth, is constructed by *The Animated Tales* and, more specifically, the implications of this construction for the target audience of 10-15 year olds. Looking closely at the manner in which the *Tales* translate Shakespeare's plays into short children's films yields interesting insights into the ways that kids are understood and reproduced by a Shakespeare industry increasingly influenced by corporate ideals and objectives. More importantly, to the degree that such corporate ideals run contrary to the ideals of a critical and self-conscious democratic society, such an analysis will hopefully suggest the need to critique and actively challenge overly simple, corporate-based notions of Shakespeare as a practical tool for the socialization of children.

Figure 9.2 Sample conference paper introduction

In addition to announcing your goals, stop now and then to reiterate important points and to highlight rhetorical transitions on which your arguments hinge. In concluding your presentation, provide a brief summary of the paper, hitting on the major points and the relevant terms so that they are fresh in your audience's mind. You'll find that questions will be more specific and helpful as a result.

The Seminar Paper as Practice

The most important preparation for conference presentations will come from seminar paper writing. Though the tone *may be* more casual and the style more rhetorically affected, a typical conference presentation looks a lot like a short scholarly article without footnotes. Since we've already discussed the form of a seminar paper in a previous chapter, briefly consider here how the various parts might differ in a conference paper format.

The Argument

As in a seminar paper, you'll want to offer your audience a clear, provocative claim. Unlike claims that appear in seminar papers, though, those in conference presentations should be introduced and reiterated throughout the paper in the form of direct, even obvious formulations. Consider the same argument as it might appear first in a seminar paper and then in a conference paper, as shown in figure 9.3.

Nothing would necessarily prevent an author from using the first introduction in a conference presentation, but the audience would feel less of a connection to a speaker who chose to do so. Obviously the second introduction—a useful example of how much more liberally metawriting can be employed in conference settings—would be wholly inappropriate in an article. Humor, however weak it may be, is also more appropriate for a conference setting, as is the slightly more colloquial voice of the second introduction. Finally, the second example demonstrates how presenters often work harder to contextualize their local arguments in relation to their larger projects—a move that helps to clarify for an audience the significance of that local argument and also allows the author to advertise his research more effectively.

Because a conference paper can be understood as a work in progress, you might also choose to go further out on a limb, when constructing your argument, than you might ordinarily do. That is, you might wish to state your claim in a slightly more radical way in order to draw in your audience. A presenter beginning his paper with the bold claim that “God has been dead since at least the eighteenth

Example 1: Seminar Paper or Article

Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* is certainly the most successful sporting treatise ever written. Never out of print since the first edition of 1653, the *Angler* ranks only behind the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer as the most frequently published work in the English language. Traditionally characterized as a simple pastoral dialogue by an equally simple, even accidental, author, the *Angler* has more recently been viewed as an allegorical protest against the precision of the Interregnum. While historians and literary critics have helped to reveal the *Angler's* general political context, however, no scholar has done justice to Walton's complex and highly specific engagement of official Interregnum policies regarding sports and pastimes. Most recent work has attempted to reconcile a traditional portrait of Walton as an innocuous, simple-minded countryman with a growing awareness of the political suggestiveness of his literary masterpiece. But Walton does more than passively evoke the mythological image of a pre-Interregnum golden age; in fact, he uses sport quite deliberately and systematically to critique contemporary laws proscribing communal recreations.

Example 2: Conference Presentation

When I was invited to talk today on any aspect of my current research, it occurred to me that my choice of a subject *should*, in fact, be rather easy. My research has involved examining sports and sporting events in Early Modern England—including the decidedly ungraceful sports of football, shin-kicking, wrestling, and bull baiting—sports that in their raw violence and capacity for excess have the power to shock the modern imagination. What I *should* do, it seemed obvious, was choose a sport with the power to shock, one that my audience simply *could not* resist. So after long and rather meticulous consideration, the right sport to discuss became obvious to me: fishing.

Seriously speaking, though, there are *three* things in particular about the subject of Early Modern sport that I'd like you to take away from this room. First of all, I want to show you how the inherently contradictory nature of sport—its ability to emblemize extreme states of order and disorder—helps to explain its political power and complexity as a metaphorical tool. I provide a detailed *example* of sport as such by demonstrating how Izaak Walton used angling to critique the legislative policies of the Interregnum . . .

Figure 9.3 Comparison of conference and seminar paper arguments

century” would likely perk up more heads than one beginning, “One can argue that the major Enlightenment thinkers succeeded in challenging many Europeans’ absolute faith in the idea of an omnipotent and omniscient deity.” Offsetting the radical formulation with a disclaimer reminding audience members that your paper is part of a “work in progress” helps to explain, even justify, your willingness to push things further than usual. It goes without saying that the more provocative your paper, the more likely is an audience to remember it and offer useful feedback on it. You should never “invent” an argument merely for rhetorical effect and you should always be sure to back up your claims later in your paper, but you should also do what you can to make people notice the argument that you are presenting.

The Situating Move

Generally speaking, your review of literature should be much more concise in conference presentations than it is in seminar papers. To the degree that it's useful, try to summarize movements or trends in the scholarship rather than the arguments of individual researchers. Avoid dwelling on obscure scholarship; whether it's fair or not, you'll get more mileage out of a reference to one of Richard Rorty's obliquely relevant essays than you will to a more obscure philosopher's directly applicable one. Audiences know who Rorty is and they may know his work quite well, so your reference will serve to keep them tuned in to what you're saying. Most of all, be generous to previous scholars, as you will want future scholars to be generous unto you.

The Evidence

Most seminar papers build arguments cumulatively, on multiple forms of evidence and numerous examples. Since conference papers are less than half the size of a typical seminar paper, however, you will have a difficult decision to make: should I present all of the examples and offer less commentary on each, or should I present fewer but more detailed examples? While different situations demand different responses, the second answer is, nine times out of ten, the better one. First, a conference paper format allows you to explain to your audience what they already know: that time is limited, which also limits the range of issues you can discuss. If you happened to select for presentation only three of the fifteen examples featured in the seminar paper version, you can simply tell the audience that you've done so and offer to discuss other examples during the question and answer period. Second, the detail you lavish onto a few, well-chosen examples, will do far more to help you build a case than will multiple, shallow readings of evidence, which an audience will try to deconstruct before they even leave the room. Finally, your audience will appreciate the limited range of topics you're choosing to discuss; instead of trying to keep up with you as you move through 15 different forms of evidence, they will be more than capable of balancing in their minds three different ideas, which, together, demonstrate the persuasiveness of your argument.

In thinking about which examples or forms of evidence to present, consider first which ones are most persuasive; second, which ones are the most vivid and poignant; and finally, which ones are likely to be most familiar to your audience. Remember that whereas you can force readers of print materials to work in rather demanding ways, you'll need to make your conference presentations as easy to follow as you possibly can.

In a twenty-minute presentation, you might dedicate a page or two to introducing your argument, a page or two to situating it in relation to

previous scholarship, and six to eight pages to analyzing a few well-chosen proofs of your argument's persuasiveness. While preparing all three parts, keep in mind the importance of clean and clear transitions, and remember that clarity is the basic characteristic of a solid presentation.

AT THE CONFERENCE

By finishing your paper ahead of time, you'll be able to participate in, and perhaps even enjoy, the actual conference. Here are some suggestions for making the most of your trip.

What to Bring

Clothing at conferences is no more formal than it is on campus. Dress as you would to teach. Bring one nice outfit for each day you plan to attend sessions, and take along a travel iron if the hotel doesn't provide one in your room. Casual clothes are a good idea too since you'll probably want to see the host site or even get in your exercise. My favorite thing about conferences is the opportunities they allow for travel: from conferencing alone, I have been able to visit most major American cities, a good chunk of Canada, and several places in Europe and the Caribbean. I always bring a backpack, where I can keep such items as my bottled water, sunglasses, and even a travel guide. My advice is to get out of the conference now and then.

Okay, back to work. Bring two hard copies of your paper. Keep them in separate places. If you check luggage, place one copy in the checked bag, and carry the other one on your person. I always bring with me an electronic copy on a disk just in case I decide to make changes to the version I read on the plane or in the hotel room before my session.

Bring a folder with all relevant information about the conference, including your hotel information, the conference program, a notepad and pen, receipt of your registration payment, and so on. I also suggest that you type up a brief (three to four sentences) biographical statement. Chairs like to personalize their introductions, but they rarely have the wherewithal to research you ahead of time. Nine times out of ten they will ask you to write up something quickly when you enter the room for your session. Prepare the biography ahead of time so that you will be introduced in a manner that you feel comfortable with. If your presentation comes from a seminar paper or dissertation chapter, bring the longer version so you can read it the night before; you'll want additional information and the complete review of literature fresh in your mind for the question and answer period. If you plan to pass out handouts, make twice as many photocopies as you anticipate needing.

Finally, if you have the equivalent of business cards, bring a few along so that you can give them out when appropriate.

Checking In

As soon as you check in to the hotel, head down to the conference site to register. Most conference organizers prepare packets for registered participants that you'll want to check out as soon as possible. Sometimes session times are altered so be sure that you know exactly when you are expected to show up for work. Most registration packets include name-tags, conference programs, information about the host city, and other pertinent information. I strongly recommend that you pay the registration fee ahead of time since most conferences will cost you more money if you pay on-site.

Find out exactly where your presentation will take place and find the room ahead of time. Count the number of seats, note whether or not there is a microphone or a podium or an overhead projector, and check out more basic things like temperature and lighting. Visualize what you will face when the time for your presentation arrives, and read your paper aloud at least one more time with the image of the room in your mind.

The Conference Begins

At larger, more prestigious conferences, the first thing you will notice is that pretentiousness reigns. People will glance at your name-tag, see that you are nobody important, and shuffle along. Be prepared for such rude behavior and learn to laugh it off. On the other hand, you'll probably be surprised by the number of strangers who will suddenly begin chatting with you. This is no time to be a wall flower. Conjure up whatever enthusiasm and charm you can find inside, and socialize with your colleagues. Especially for graduate students, who very well might see some of these people in interview rooms later on, such networking may prove very beneficial. Remember also that rank and the usual academic hierarchies apply less in conference settings than they do on campuses; that is, when socializing, you should act like a colleague and avoid seeming overly deferential. And if you should meet that superstar who has influenced your work, avoid gushing or acting in a sycophantic way, which will turn off everyone around you, including the superstar. Networking is, of course, a crucial component of conference-going, and it is likely to cause you more stress than even the presentation itself. I hate clichés, but on this one, I agree you should simply be yourself. Acting like someone else—*acting*, in general—will only make you unlikable.

Should you have the opportunity to meet an editor—of a journal, a volume of essays, or an academic press—let them know what you're working on. Again, act like a colleague and avoid offering voluntarily the irrelevant information that you are only a graduate student. Editors are more likely to care about your work than your status. Often they will offer you useful information about how to make a particular project more marketable, especially at the dissertation stage. Occasionally, your conversations with an editor will lead to bigger and better things such as publication opportunities. At least three of my own publications have grown out of conversations with editors at conferences. Networking is sometimes tedious business, and some people dread this aspect of conferences for perfectly good reasons. But it is worth your time and energy to pursue relationships that are likely to serve you in various ways throughout your career.

As an audience member in attendance of conference sessions, you will learn a great deal about the likely dynamic of your own upcoming session and about conference presentations in general. Focus carefully on what works for you in the presentation and what doesn't, and tune in to audience behavior and body language as well. Take additional notes on the conduct of the chair, since you may wish to organize a panel sometime prior to graduation. All of this information will undoubtedly serve you at various times both during and after the conference is over. So unless you happen to be presenting in the very first session of a conference, make it a point to attend at least one session prior to your own presentation.

The Presentation and Q&A

Show up about ten to fifteen minutes prior to the start of your session. You won't necessarily have an opportunity to meet the conference chair (and other panel members) before the actual session so allow yourself some extra time for introductions and chitchat. If you've brought a biographical statement and the situation seems appropriate, give it to the chair now. If you need to set up an overhead, cue a film clip, or pass out handouts, do so now. As the session time approaches, take a deep breath, relax, and realize with confidence that you are more than ready to go.

Sometimes a chair will allow questions immediately after individual presentations, but usually questions will be saved for a period of time after the entire panel has presented. Your experience delivering oral reports has undoubtedly made you adept at answering hard questions, and you should try, simply as a matter of strategy, to anticipate the worst before facing a conference audience. You will almost certainly

be surprised by the collegiality of most of your audience members. If there happened to be a "right" way to answer questions, I would happily tell you what it is. But since different speakers handle questions in so many different, wonderful ways, I'll focus instead on a much easier subject: the *wrong* way to answer questions.

Never Pretend to Know The Answers When You Don't

Not only will your audience recognize when you're fudging, but you will also undermine the persuasiveness of your entire presentation by seeming dishonest. If you don't know the answer to a question, simply say so: "You know, your question reminds me of how much I still have to research in the area of cognitive theory. Since this is a work in progress, I just don't know yet how exactly to answer the question. I'd certainly be interested in hearing your sense of things." Notice how such an answer not only calls attention to the idea of a conference presentation as an incomplete and evolving work, but it also pacifies the questioner by empowering him to reverse roles and become the teacher for a minute.

Next, Never Pretend to Understand a Poorly Articulated Question

If you are completely lost, ask that the audience member repeat the question. If the problem is related to confusing or complex terminology, seek to clarify the matter before answering. Let's say that your audience member asks you about the influence of French theory on your understanding of a particular text. Since "French theory" is a fairly vague term, you might begin by working to establish that you are on the same page with your examiner. If you simply don't understand what the person means by "French theory," ask him, "would you mind clarifying what you mean by 'French theory?'" Or if you have a pretty good sense of the matter, you might approach the problem in the following way: "By 'French theory,' I take you to mean X, Y, and Z. Is this correct?" Once the term has been defined, you can move onto to your response.

Never Blow Off a Question or a Comment

You will probably be surprised by how many audience members raise their hands simply to declare their opinion on a subject your presentation happened only to touch on. The individual has no intention of asking you a question. Probably, he just wants to hear himself speak. Assume, first of all, that such behavior annoys others in the room as much as it annoys you. But show yourself to be diplomatic by responding in some way or other, even if only to acknowledge the validity of the audience member's opinion. By doing so, you will

soothe the individual's ego, and you will impress the other audience members with your ability to remain professional and collegial under strained circumstances.

Most of All, Avoid Seeming Condescending

Treat every question as though it's the best idea you've ever encountered, and you will earn the respect and good will of the audience members, who will continue to think well of you long after the conference. If possible tie your responses into ideas covered by the other presenters on your panel, which will show that you paid attention to their work as well. The question and answer period, when conducted effectively, should feel like a conversation between colleagues, not an interrogation or a lecture. If you are like most people, you will enjoy witnessing and participating in such conversations as much as any other part of the experience.

CONCLUSION

I won't deny it: I've attended conferences that were so boring, the paper topics so cliché, and the people so pompous and competitive that I happily spent more time in my hotel room watching ESPN than I did attending sessions. At times, the audiences in attendance of my talks have been so small that I have felt lucky just to answer one question about my paper. At other times, I have endured listening to multiple audience members going on and on about their "sense of the matter," completely uninterested in engaging the panelists' papers. There is no question: at their worst, conferences are an utter waste of time (though tourism can make the worst of them tolerable).

At their best, though, conferences can benefit you and your university in various ways. On a personal level, you will build important professional connections, learn a good deal about publishing practices, discover hot topics in your field, and, hopefully, receive valuable feedback on your own research that may lead to publication. The oral presentation and the Q&A component constitute excellent preparations for job market scenarios, as does the experience of socializing with your peers at other universities. Your university will benefit from supporting your participation at national conferences since it looks good when you look good. In short, by seizing the opportunity to attend an appropriate number of sessions, present your research, and enjoy a few well-chosen local activities, you will find many conferences to be illuminating and enriching experiences.